

Dena Merriam

# Crusading for a Women's World Order

By KUMUD MOHAN

Oh, I am quite comfortable in India," smiled Dena Merriam, looking deceptively Indian in a cream silk *salwar kameez* with an orange *dupatta* draped over her shoulder. "I think India and I have a special connection."

Merriam, founder of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, has arranged two conferences this year in India to promote women's voices in religion and politics.

"If women, who are life-givers by nature, were elevated to leadership positions in equal numbers with men, would we not see a more caring society with less violence, with more attention to the needs of children and youth, and with greater sensitivity to the environment?" asks Merriam.

Merriam's connection with India started some 35 years ago while she was studying for her master's in sacred literature at Columbia University in New York. The subject of her thesis was a comparison between the Bhagavad Gita and the Book of Job from the Old Testament. Around that time she also came

across the book *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. "It was a very powerful book and changed my whole life," she says. "Yoga and meditation became a part of my everyday routine."

Merriam was instinctively drawn to spirituality as she was surrounded by art and culture from childhood. Both her parents were avid art collectors, and her father, David Finn, was a photographer of sculptures. When it came to finding a profession, Merriam chose to write on the spiritual aspect of art when she became the editor of the magazine *Sculpture Review* from 1988 to 1993. "I wrote on how art can put us in touch with a higher reality," she says.

In 2000, Merriam—who served on the boards of Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy, All India Movement for Seva, among others—was called upon to co-chair the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders instituted by the United Nations.

At the summit in New York, she was dismayed to find there were hardly any women participants among the 1,500 delegates. Only two of the 25 speakers were women, and Merriam felt the eastern faiths and



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traditions were under-represented.

So, she started networking with women leaders around the world—particularly those in India, Thailand, Taiwan, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan and Cambodia—from the fields of spirituality as well as business, government and environment.

The culmination was a convention of another U.N. World Peace Summit, this time with 500 women leaders, in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2002. It laid the foundation of the Global Peace Initiative of Women.

"I firmly believe that women, with their inherent qualities of caring and compassion, can play a major role in bringing about a greater world balance and creating a new dynamic will that would successfully address the many challenges facing a world torn apart today by religion, conflict, poverty and environmental degradation," she says. "Do you know that in some of the Native American communities, elderly women were consulted before a tribe could go to war? This was to

ensure that the war was a necessity, because women would not send their sons unless there was no better alternative...."

A sequel to Geneva was a five-day international summit on Making Way for the Feminine for the Benefit of the World Community in Jaipur, Rajasthan, from March 6 to 10, 2008, to coincide with International Women's Day. About 450 leaders from 50 countries, both men and women belonging to different faiths, including the conflict zones of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Israel and Palestine got together to deliberate on issues concerning governance, conflict and peace. They shared their experiences and also ways of spiritual healing and reconciliation through ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (passive resistance).

Immediately afterward, the Global Peace Initiative of Women, in partnership with the U.S. Institute of Peace, invited 40 young Iraqi community leaders to Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, for a dialogue on building a peaceful and secure Iraq. Many of the participants worked in NGOs, while others were professionals like architects, lawyers and doctors.

"In the end, each of us came to know more deeply that we are one human family and each person's suffering is our own. The teachings on oneness that we'd heard at the Jaipur summit now became real," says Merriam.

Another important outcome of the Jaipur summit was the organization of the first U.S. Summit of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, in Colorado this November. Its focus is: "Gathering the Spiritual Voice of America to Deepen our Knowing of Oneness and our Compassion as a Nation."



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## For more information:

The Global Peace Initiative of Women

<http://www.gpiw.org/index.html>

United States Institute of Peace

<http://www.usip.org/>